

Henderson

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Home Life

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Lands

Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the
Presbyterian Church

501 Witherspoon Building, Philadelphia



South America





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HOME-LIFE IN BRAZIL.

[NOTE.—The writer of this leaflet has written of home-life in *Brazil*, as known to her personally, and as fairly representing that of South America in general, so far as the interior of the country is concerned.]

While the coast cities and the interior towns connected with them by the few railroads which until the present time have penetrated into the “Sertão” (as the vast region little known and thinly populated of the interior of Brazil is called), have the civilization and modes of life of Southern Europe, the people of remote country districts retain many of the primitive habits and customs of their Eastern ancestry. It would be easy to imagine one’s self back among patriarchal races and Biblical customs.

The Houses of the poor and middle classes are of the simplest construction, "called *pão a pique*." Heavy posts set in the ground serve as a framework, while upright poles between them, interlaced with pliant boughs (or the *cipós*, which climb over the trees in every Brazilian forest), plastered with clay, form the walls. There are wooden shutters to the apertures which serve as windows, and there is a tile roof or grass thatch. A few articles of rude furniture supply the needs in that direction.

Even the more pretentious houses, with their curtainless windows and bare floors, seem but cheerless homes to the more favored inhabitants of colder climates. The mild climate and open-air life, however, render such civilized appliances less indispensable, and the swarms of children who pour from these humble dwellings prove that they are not unhealthy.

Women, though ignorant and superstitious, hold a higher position and exert a greater influence than in many other countries. According to their light they are often notable housewives, attending well

to their duties, which consist in the care of the children and the preparation of their food.

Industries. One of the household industries is the preparation of “*farinha*,” which supplied entirely the place of wheaten bread until a comparatively recent period, and is still a principal article of food in the country, where baker’s bread cannot be procured. Most of the farms have what is called a “*monjolo*,” a simple contrivance for crushing corn, hulling rice, and even coffee in small quantities. It consists of a large, square log, twenty or thirty feet long, suspended on a pivot in the middle. One end is hollowed out into a sort of large spoon, capable of holding several gallons of water, and the other end furnished with a strong, heavy, wooden pestle, which falls into a mortar under it. The spoon of the *monjolo* is placed under the fall of any small stream of running water. As soon as it is filled, it empties itself by its own weight, and the pestle at the other end falls back with a heavy thud into the mortar. This process repeats itself as long as the water is turned on, and is said to be the most perfectly adapted labor-saving machine ever invented

for the use of primitive people. It is generally protected from the weather by a slight building, which contains a long trough, in which the Indian corn is soaked for several days before crushing, and three or four little piles of brick or stones to support the large sheet-iron pan in which the meal is toasted, after being taken from the mortar and sifted.

Food. The *farinha* thus prepared keeps for a long time, and is sprinkled over the food or used with milk. It is an indispensable part of a meal in the interior. *Farinha* is also made of the *mandioca* or *cassava* root and with “*feijão*”—dark beans, and rice, constitutes the larger part of the family supply of food. “*Conve*” and the tender green sprouts of the “*abobara*” or cushaw pumpkin, are largely used for green food. The *conve* is what is known as *collards* in some parts of the United States. It is shredded fine like slaw and scalded. Thus prepared it makes a very wholesome dish, which is much esteemed. The family must be poor, indeed, which has not its little *conve* patch. The use of the pumpkin shoots was learned from the Indians, from whom many customs were derived.

Palm cabbage is another food in general use. The top of one species of palm is cut off in a stick two or three feet long and as thick as a man's arm. Layer after layer is peeled off until the tender bud is reached and it supplies a small dish of *palmito*. A tree is, of course, destroyed to furnish each dish, but this is considered of little importance, as the palms are abundant and of rapid growth. Butter is little used except in the towns, and is imported from Europe; but home-made cheese is an important article of diet, and milk, fresh from the cow, is largely used and considered very beneficial for invalids. It takes the place of the universal early morning coffee on the farms, and is brought into the towns in bottles strung across the backs of horses or mules.

Medicines. The people are quite skillful in the use of vegetable remedies, the *flora* of the country being exceedingly rich in medicinal plants and trees. Much of this knowledge was also derived from the Indians, and every experienced head of a household possesses an almost unlimited pharmacopia. They seem to make up for the want of knowledge derived from books by a much larger amount of practical

knowledge than usually falls to the lot of those who have more theoretical information.

They are a kindly and hospitable folk, almost Eastern in their kindness to strangers.

Customs. Marriages are made very early, sometimes at twelve years of age, and frequently at fourteen or fifteen. As in warm climates generally, children develop very early, and, consequently, the burdens of life fall heavily, upon the women especially. The girls are pretty, bright creatures, with sparkling eyes and abundant glossy, dark hair; but they soon fade and lose their beauty. By the time they are thirty-five or forty they look like old women. Children are much more docile than their more active fellows in colder countries, and even in their plays are rather languid. Their minds seem to partake of the early bodily development, and where they have the opportunity to attend school they are often more advanced than the children of the same age in Northern countries, but they (the girls especially) frequently leave school so young that the development is apt to be arrested after a certain age.

There is much that is patriarchal in the simplicity of their lives. Some of their ways are quite interesting. When a young person comes into the presence of the parent after a short separation the father or mother extends the hand, palm downward, and the child bows over it and presses it to his lips in a most reverential manner.

The families are frequently very large,—twenty or twenty-four children by one mother are not uncommon. In one of the native churches a man of thirty-two years of age had two grandchildren, he having married at sixteen and his daughter at twelve.

The custom of going barefoot still prevails largely in the *sitios*. *Tamancoz*, a species of wooden soled half-shoe, or *chinellas*—slippers which can easily be slipped off the feet—are generally used. The feet are always bathed at night, and it would be a breach of hospitality not to offer water to guests for that purpose. The earthen floors and careless habit of throwing scraps of food and bones on the ground, offer abundant opportunities for the dogs to eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' tables.

Until quite recently the custom of “weeping and wailing and making

a noise" on the occasion of death prevailed in remote places, and even the hired weeping women are still spoken of by aged people. Corpses are brought into the rural cemeteries wrapped in a sheet and carried by bearers in a hammock and buried without coffins. In the small towns little children's bodies, dressed in the gayest apparel obtainable, are borne, in an open pasteboard coffin, hired for the occasion, by their little playfellows to the grave, with the little dead faces exposed for the last time to the sun's rays and then taken out and laid in the bosom of Mother Earth.

It is not unusual to see a number of rude baskets, woven of the cane which grows abundantly in the thickets, turned upside down over the tiny graves after they have been used to bring the little bodies from a distance for burial. The earth, they say, was cursed, and the idea of burying in unhallowed ground is so abhorrent that long journeys are made to lay them away in holy ground. In some places the bells ring out a merry peal when a baby dies, to celebrate the entrance of an "*anginho*"—a little angel—into heaven.

Babies are usually brought for baptism on the eighth day. They are sprinkled with holy water, signed with the cross, salt and spittle from the priest's lips is put into the mouth and his breath breathed into their nostrils to give them a living soul. If they die before this ceremony takes place, their little bodies are buried in an unconsecrated corner of the cemetery, and their souls supposed to be in limbo. When death approaches the ignorant people frequently take the dying from their rude beds and lay them on a rude mat or on the ground, to breathe their last, placing candles in their hands to light their way through the dark valley.

Nannie Henderson.

Salem, Virginia.

Price, 2 cents; 15 cents per dozen.

